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ABSTRACT

The economic decline of rural communities and the accompanying trend toward rural school consolidation are intimately connected to the American liberal and individualist world view. In general, liberalism has meant having a representative government, an economic arrangement that maximizes the freedom of accumulation, and an educational system that legitimizes the pursuit of truth rather than preparation for an occupation. However, liberalism has not always been a desirable cultural standard. For example, the classical and feudal periods were marked by a communal orientation as opposed to an individualist orientation. Communality was replaced by liberalism in the 17th century when Christianity and a salvationist theology became dominant. Modern liberalism has led to a heavily individualized worldview that has resulted in a competitive milieu dominating most economic, political, and educational thinking. Some effects on education have been a focus on efficiency and the role of the school in determining the winners and losers in society. Rural schools also have become the vehicle for a powerful cultural message: success in school means leaving the rural community. What is needed is a return to a communal orientation, which would end the focus on efficiency achieved through rural school consolidation, and might address some of the reasons why rural America is in decline in the first place. Equally important, rural communities should have input concerning the status of their schools, and schools must begin to serve their communities in new ways. School districts need to consider alternatives to consolidation including sharing arrangements, telecommunications, and alternative school financing. (LP)

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Forces Supporting Consolidation and Some Alternatives

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When I was first asked to teach a philosophy of education course I discovered that the topic frightened many of my students. They considered philosophy to be shrouded in some mysetrious language and they weren't sure they had the intellectual wherewithal to make sense of it. I looked at my syllabus and saw such words as axiology, ontology, teleology and I decided that I wasn't doing anything to alleviate their anxieties. I thought about this problem a lot and sometime thereafter I started to begin my courses by saying, the business of philosophy is really very simple. The whole affair can be reduced to searching for answers to three questions that all peoples must ask themselves at some point. The three questions are these:

1) How will we govern ourselves?

2) How will we meet our needs?

3) How will we educate our youth?

Axiology, ontology, etc, are all merely avenues one can use to come up with answers to these questions. I have found that this takes much of the mystery of philosophy away and, at the same time, it helps students come to understand that the business of education is far more significant in the larger scheme of things then they had previously imagined. It doesn't take much exploration into these questions to come to understand that you can't answer one without answering the other two. They are all intimately connected. Philosophers have a word for the American answer to these

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questions, and it is very similar to what one might call the favorite answer of the nations in the industrialized West. The term is "liberalism," and at one time you could convey quite a bit of meaning with references like "liberal politics," "liberal economics," and "liberal education." Now such phrases cause a heck of a lot of confusion. But liberalism, very generally, has meant some type of representative government, some type of economic arrangements that maximizes the freedom of accumulation, and some type of education that legitimized the pursuit of truth rather than preparation for an occupation. There's lots more to be said about these things, but this is enough to go on with.

What I'm trying to do here is create a rough framework for making sense of this whole consolidation thing at a notch or two deeper than we were at last night. Remember what I said about efficiency and how this was a taken-for-granted in this country. Remember, too, that I made the claim that we take efficiency as a kind of unquestionable natural law, as something inherently good. Several of the teacher education program goals at my institution state that we are to make "efficient planners" out of our students, "efficient classroom managers," "efficient evaluators of student progress," etc. Today I want to talk about how this kind of emphasis on what is efficient creeped into our culture and now enjoys the status of common sense.

The first step in this task is, quite simply, to demonstrate that it wasn't always there. This is tough for us Americans because the cult

of efficiency is older than we are as a country. In order to get a sense for the fact that efficiency was not always a pivotal standard upon which most of the significant questions about life turned, we have to take a look at "pre-liberal" answers to those three important questions. One way to do this is to look at the feudal world, or the classical world of ancient Rome and Greece. Of course there are many other cultures to which we might turn, but most of us are at least marginally familiar with our own Western history, so we'll use these. In my view, the most striking contrast between the feudal/classical worldview and our liberal one is that one has a marked communal orientation and the other a marked individual orientation. And I don't think I have to tell you which is which. The Greeks didn't even have a word for "self" the way we use it today. In the Greek world, one lived one's life in the service of the community and the contributions you made were the criteria by which you were judged.

This changed slightly at the end of the classical era, after the fall of Rome, but the feudal world of the Middle Ages remained, nevertheless, very communally-oriented. One of the greatest living philosophers today claims that the very beginning of the shift to an individual orientation to life occurred with the ascendancy of Christianity and a salvationist theology. Though the Christian church evolved with a comunal organization, salvation was an individualized affair. Either you were chosen by God or you were not. This had a dramatic affect on an individual's psyche. In some ways the question was no longer "what can I do to advance the welfare of my

community?" but became, "what can I do to advance my chances at salvation?" Over centuries, this individual orientation to life became more and more pervasive.

In time, it led to some interesting questions related to politics, economics, and education. Many things began to happen in the seventeenth century, the century when the modern liberalism that we've come to take as a kind of law of nature began to take shape. As individuals came to accumulate more and more, they looked to government for protection. Suppose you grew to amass a pretty good income through a shipping business in seventeenth century England. Suppose, too, that in a bad year pirates took a few of your ships. What could you do about this? The King was a descedant of a landed family, as were the members of parliament, and these folks had no particular interest in the success or failure of a shipping business. You can see as more and more individuals moved into a kind of middle class, the more talk spread about a different answer to the three pivotal questions. A government where people were considered equal, perhaps, and where the power of church and state was separated, where the phrase "laissez-faire" was the law of the land. John Locke in England, Jean Rousseau in France, and Thomas Jefferson in the United States were all prominent spokespersons with a new answer to the timeless, pivotal questions I opened with here today.

The individual was at the heart of all of these answers. The notion of the equality of humans, so important to get the idea of a

representative government off the ground and to debunk the idea of the divine right of kings, also suggested serious attention to the business of education. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, tried three times to pass a public school law in the Virginia legislature. Individuals were to have an equal shot at acquiring property and many thought that providing a free education to all would guarantee that equal shot. And once the property was acquired, a political voice, in the form of a vote, came with it. The pivotal questions all had new answers, all interwoven with the others, and the individual was the common denominator.

We're building, here, to the question of where all this emphasis on efficiency came from, so please bear with me. To get there, it seems to me, it might be useful to look at a cultural shift that seems ralatively innocuous in some ways, but speaks volumes in others. At the time of Thomas Jefferson, if you wanted to say something nice about an individual, if you wanted to really use a superlative, you referred to an individual as "virtuous." As an attribute, virtue speaks to the quality of the relationships one maintains with other people. In other words, its the kind of accolade that lingers from the days when people's outlook on life was far more attentive to the immediate human community. Today, if we want to say something really nice about an individual, we say he or she is really "successful," meaning that in the pursuit of what interested this person, this person did well.

I think it's worth it to think about this for a minute. When the emphasis in politics, economics, and education is on the individual, a kind of competition results. The "successful" person is the stronger competitor. One hundred years into our history as a nation, Charles Darwin added a little fuel to this already hot fire. To him, or more precisely, to those who interpreted him, humans were in a survival race that always went to the fittest. This kind of thinking has worked its way into the very fabric of our culture.

The emphasis on individualism created a kind of competition out of the affairs of life. And it's here that we begin to pick up some leverage over why such importance is placed on efficiency. If the question of the quality of one's life is left up to success or failure in a kind of competition, a predisposition to consider what's efficient makes a heck of a lot of sense.

But there's a bit more we need to consider. If life is a kind of competition, there will be winners and losers. What's to prevent the losers from taking out their disappointment on the winners? As James Madison put it, "if men were angels, we would need no government." He consequently put a great deal of thought into the matter of civil government and he decided that what was needed was a government that maximized "domestic tranquility." In other words, one of the chief functions of government was to serve as arbiter in the disputes that would inevitably arise from free and equal citizens busily pursuing their own interests. In this political theory, the one we call liberal, the one we have embraced since our

constitutional convention, government had to stay neutral, it had to stand for no particular individual or group of individuals.

Now all of this sounds fine, but we need to take a close look at what has happened as a result of our embrace of this theory. And this brings us back to a remark I made yesterday. Our political theory is meritocratic, not democratic; it is procedural, not particpatory. In other words, those invested with the power to arbitrate disputes had to be those with the finest minds, the finest educations, the finest qualifications, in short, they had to be those with the most "merit." Those without that kind of merit, those who find themselves embroiled in differences with others, these folks are not supposed to participate in finding a solution, they are supposed to defer to the procedures put in place to handle these matters.

Schools, in addition, then, to being a basis for making the claim of equality, had to attend to two other matters. One was socializing our youth into the ways of what many philosphers and political scientists call the "procedural republic" with all kinds of schooling procedures; and the other was to become a major variable in decisions about who has merit. It is interesting to me that there are often lingering misgivings about whether schooling gives anyone a "leg up" in rural areas. In fact, rural areas are about the only places where one can still detect a little pride in folks who claim they "never finished" high school. It's always been a little curious to me that the phrase "dropped out of school" is never used.

At any rate, despite the skepticism, rural folks have never been very critical of what goes on in school. The individual outlook, the competition this creates, the affinity for efficiency this creates, all point to one undeniable, though seemingly unquestioned, aspect of modern schooling: it produces winners and losers. Most recently we've taken to calling the winners "gifted" and the losers "disabled."

Increasingly, in rural areas, our schools have become the vehicle for a powerful culture message: success means getting the heck out of here. If you want a ticket out, do well in school.

We've come a long way here and at last I'm getting ready to make a point. That point is that if we had a communal orientation concerning the affairs of life, or maybe its more correct to say that if a communal orientation was part of the ascendant answer to the three pivotal questions, our schools wouldn't operate the way they do and we would not be discussing rural school consolidation today.

Let me stop here just long enough to say that I know this sounds like a tall order. But you can bet knocking monarchs off their throne by undermining the common sense once wrapped in the phrase the "divine right of kings" was a tall order as well. And just as Enlightenment philosophers did not shrink from their task, there are plenty of able philosophers today who are moving this agenda forward. Here in Dillon we have to look no further than the philosopher-politician in Missoula, Daniel Kemmis. I suspect that many of you have read his book, *Community and the Politics of Place.*

It is a wonderful piece of work and it covers much of the same territory I've breezed through here today.

But let me push on to try and make just a few more points. We have embraced a heavily individualized worldview in this country, this has resulted in a competitive milieu that dominates most of our economic, political, and educational thinking. And this has created a propensity to look for efficiency in all of these areas. I've tried to make the case that somewhere in these circumstances lies the answer to why we consider consolidating schools a plausible educational option as well as the answer to why we conduct schools in the manner that we do. But there's more in there than this. The matter of why rural America is in decline in the first place is embedded somewhere in there as well. Most of you know that as far as the great arbiter is concerned, our government, that is, corporations are endowed with individual rights. Like other individuals, they are free to accumulate as much as they possibly can, so long as they don't infringe on the rights of others.

It's a funny thing, though, about corporations, year after year they seem to make more money than I do. In fact, they seem to be able to make lots more money than many other individuals. This is where a mockery is made of James Madison. The idea that the government is neutral regarding different individuals is simply ludicrous. Those individuals that are large corporations have a stacked deck. They have all the cards. They spend millions each year wining and dining the people we elect to make decisions for us.

And some of the largest corporations in the world today are agribusiness industries with headquarters right here in the United States. As far as the profits of agribusiness industries are concerned, the fewer people in the countryside, the greater their profits. The more people in place to work the land and to provide alternatives to agribusiness inputs, the lower the profits.

I bring this up because I want our thinking to be clear on this matter of consolidation. We're not here to consider it because some law of nature is at work that says rural communities must get smaller. We're here because some decisions have been made rather than others that might have been made. Paul Kennedy, a Yale historian who some consider to be the leading historian in the nation, not a particularly radical scholar, not a Marxist, or even a "liberal" to use that word in its contemporary context, recently wrote that "the multinational corporations have become so powerful that there isn't a government in the world that can stop them."

I'm not trying to depress anyone, I bring it up only to remind us that as is the case with the government itself, we give corporations the right to exist. *In theory*, we could take it away. I'm not necessarily saying we should, but I do wish to say that our rural schools can begin to share with our students that *in theory* this is their privilege. If we are able to do that, we've turned a pivotal corner that rural schools, consolidated or not, must get around. That is, we've got to open up the possibility that schools can serve the community in ways that it never has previously, and, that they might do this without

sacrificing the individual advances some community students may wish to make. All of this is to say that rural schools can stop acting as the messenger that says, "success is something one acquires somewhere else." Schooling can become a community affair.

Some folks in North Dakota recently authored a report on alternatives to consolidation. It's called "All the Good Choices are Gone," or something very close to that. But there are *some* options. There are pairing/sharing arrangements and there are telecommunication arrangements. It has been my experience that rural districts will fiddle with these as long as they can before they impose the kiss of death by creating a school-less community. It pains me greatly that rural children are increasingly less and less free to choose to live their lives in the place that defines their history, their familial heritage. We often hide the pain with a vague hope that we want to be the truth, that our children will be better off in the city, they'll have more opportunity. Or maybe they'll be more successful if they give up their roots, if they raise their children away from cousins and grandparents, if they stay true to the pursuit of individual accumulation and don't get hung up by some kind of communal or familial obligation.

In a recent book he calls *The Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of America*, sociologist Kenneth Jackson argues that America is becoming virtually devoid of any communal dimension. Robert Bellah suggests that the suburbs, that part of America to which everyone aspires, have merely become "lifestyle enclaves," places

where people of like income live amidst one another. They have no commonalities, no "common-unity" that might make them a community. These circumstances, I contend, are the direct result of two centuries or more of a heavily individualized worldview. And as everyone knows, Madison's scheme for maintaining domestic tranquility is becoming an increasingly severe burden. Our prison population has tripled since 1970, the crimes, well it is enough to say that we lead the world by huge margins in crimes of all types, but especially in such categories as violent crimes and crimes against women. Another sociologist published a book recently called *Before the Shooting Begins* and, well, I think the title says it all.

I know of rural advocates who cannot face the thought of closing another rural school and inflicting the kind of hopelessness this often causes in rural communities. I know too, that hard-pressed farmers and ranchers cannot continue to bear the brunt of the financial burden we've made of modern schooling. Some say it's time for a rural civil rights movement of the sort orchestrated by other oppressed groups. While I don't know what to make of this suggestion, I do think we have to push for more creative thinking about financing schools. There's been some of this. Some states try to float legal gambling as a solution to our school finance woes. I think it was Ted Sizer who said, how ironic that we try to fund schools with lotteries that depend on the widespread ignorance of mathematics for their very existence.

For me, I think we need to open the federal purse. I'm not satisfied with what we got out of the billions we spent on defense during the 1980s. I think back to Grenada. We really showed those guys, didn't we? The smallest nation in the western hemisphere and we beat the tar out of them. And Panama. And the most recent debacle, the so-called Iraq war, where we killed more of our own men than the enemy did. This last one was the real kicker. We usually stretch the pretense that we're in these wars to protect democracy. In the Iraq war we were in there to reinstate a he.editary monarch. Spending so much of the public purse to go to war to protect the investments of our multinational corporations is something I'm finding it more and more difficult to tolerate. Particularly when I see young rural parents rummaging through cast-off shoes at garage sales to keep something on the feet of their children. Rural people are increasingly being robbed of the opportunity to lead a life with dignity and I think its tremendously important that we measure what we do with rural schools in terms of whether we're contrbuting to this develoment or trying to correct it.

Thank you.